

Wings of Hope

Story: Wings of Hope

Storylink: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/2051971/1/>

Category: Golden Sun

Genre: Chapters: 7

Author: Omniflyer

Authorlink: <https://www.fanfiction.net/u/444657/>

Last updated: 02/22/2005

Words: 17982

Rating: K+

Status: In Progress

Content: Chapter 1 to 7 of 7 chapters

Source: FanFiction.net

Summary: [Chapter 7 is (finally) up] [Sequel to Light's Shadow] While Picard dangles for his life on the edge of the Dry Shrine's island, the Windies are being flanked by some people they'd just as soon avoid. Tempting the OBHL and FBM in one chapter. Beautiful!

***Chapter 1*: Rebuilding**

We're off and running again.

(Dew): Joy consumes me...

The much awaited (?) sequel to Light's Shadow.

(Char): ...what he said.

You guys are so helpful...

"So what are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm trying to tell you the same thing I've been saying for the last two days, and you still haven't heard, *sir*. They're still alive, and they're still dangerous," Mokol muttered, somehow perfectly melding proper politeness to a superior officer and spite into a fluid tone of conversation.

"There is no being or group of beings that can stand against the forces we control. Nothing, and no one." Colder and more irritated of a tone now, perhaps not so much at the bitterness of Mokol but at the preposterousness of the idea that there exists a force that could rival the glorious Keunam Fighters.

"And what about a Venus Adept?" Mokol countered slyly.

"They exist only in legend."

"Tell that to the fighters he slew in the last battle."

"I don't have to tell my Fighters anything," he answered bitterly. "Menial tasks like that are *your* job, Mokol. Remember that." Mokol didn't answer, but merely strode out of the room silently, fuming and wishing that, if only for a moment, he could pull rank on that arrogant and short-sighted fool of a leader they had. What a fool he was!

To even call him a Jupiter Adept... disgraceful.

- - - - -

As Sol rose over the sparsely vegetated area where the Shrine of Jupiter and Mars stood, Feizhi slowly blinked her way to consciousness. Morning already. Why was it that whenever sleep enveloped her the deepest, Sol rose the earliest?

Sighing deeply over her lack of fatigue (which was, in and of itself, brought about solely by the expiration of her trusted bodyguard), she sat up slowly and glanced either way up and down the path. No Fighters in sight. She sighed again, this time of relief, and started walking around the shrine.

Originally, she had come to the shrine to locate Ivan and Sheba, but as neither were anywhere in sight, she found herself increasingly distracted by the allure of the building itself. It was build sturdily with the same sort of design that the Weyardian Lighthouses were crafted. In fact, the building itself seemed an extension of the Jupiter and Mars Lighthouses, blending the purple and red stones of each wonderfully. The sunlight reflected off it just enough to keep her attention on it.

Great, she thought, a Jupiter Adept who get sidetracked by pretty stones and sunlight. Jupiter help me...

Looking up to the sky, she found herself measuring the height of the shrine and subconsciously comparing it to the height of the Weyardian Lighthouses. She had never climbed them, of course, but she had seen Venus Lighthouse from afar, so she felt suitably able to make the comparison. After staring for about five minutes, she judged it to be only a quarter of the height of the Elemental Lighthouses, and just as wide around.

The back of the lighthouse, however, was nothing compared to the front. While the front of the lighthouse was polished and detailed, catching the sunlight as a testament to Mars and Jupiter, the back was shoddy and crumbling. Feizhi even thought she caught a glimpse of some small pieces of the wall falling off.

"A short, stubby lighthouse. Lazy architects..." she trailed, chuckling slightly at the concept of ancient people designing and creating the great buildings, though stopping short at realizing that she was in no laughing mood. "I wonder why that was funny...?"

She wouldn't have much time to think about it, however, for no sooner had the final word escaped her lips than a rather large chunk broken off from halfway down the wall and made its descent right on top of her.

- - - - -

"Well, this is just bloody perfect," Felix muttered to himself, arms folded across his chest as usual and a scowl across his face.

"Ooh. Not just *normal* perfect," Picard quipped. "*Bloody* perfect. Now we're getting serious." Felix deepened his scowl, sent it at Picard, then walked forward, into a village

that was burned to the ground, the pungent scent of smouldering ruins in his nostrils.

The battle was long since over, the dead covered the battlefield, and Sol was slowly rising as if to show the Adepts how miserable their lives had become. The area was a metaphor for their lives, wrecked and lost.

And still somehow in the middle of it all, Mia stood high atop a rock that once supported the archway into the village, looking as beautiful and strong as ever. She looked stronger now, the battle having been over and Shalex (or Alex now, as she insisted) long since retreated. Her life was still a shambles, but something that had happened had given her strength and hope, and the others never got an answer when they asked. If they did, she would simply look longingly at her ring, and then smile at them, something they hadn't seen much of for far too long.

Somewhere along the line, they had lost much: friends, their home, and for a while, some even lost hope. But a new world was upon them, and a new challenge before them. It was time to act.

"So, Mia, are you actually gonna say anything to us, or are you gonna just keep us guessing about what happened to you?" Gareth asked her. Again, she glanced slyly at her ring, smiled at him, and hopped down off the rock, following in the footsteps of Felix and Picard, who were now deep into the ex-village. "Thought so," he sighed.

"Aw, let her be," Jenna said. "The fact is, she's happy now, right?" Gareth scratched the back of his head, and nodded assent.

"Well, I guess I'm happy if you are," he replied, moving in quickly, kissing her swiftly and then just as smoothly

walking to catch up to the others. Jenna blushed, and followed suit.

"You know," she said, slipping her hand into his, "we weren't talking about me."

"No, but I *was* thinking about you, and you know I'm only smart enough to think about one thing at a time."

"Too true."

Mia and the other two were talking at the other side of the village. It was a small place, so it didn't take very long to cross.

"...it's our best bet," they heard Picard saying just as his voice came within hearing range.

"What is?" Gareth asked.

"Picking a direction and moving that way," Picard said.
"We're gonna have to go somewhere."

"I agree," Felix nodded, unfolding his arms and knocking his ponytail back over his shoulder to keep it out of his mind.
"We choose a direction and walk." Jenna looked unconvinced.

"What about the others? Ivan, Sheba, Feizhi and Sean are all still out there," she said, voicing the primary concerns of the others.

"We're only going to stand a chance of finding them by picking a direction and walking," Mia pointed out. Jenna nodded.

"I suppose so," she agreed.

"So," Gareth said, clapping his hands together and brushing the dirt off them. "Where to?"

"Remember, we're effectively on a floating island. There isn't very far we can go before we get cut off," Felix said as a cautionary. The others nodded.

"Everywhere we *can* go is effectively a floating island," Picard said. "And what do you mean, 'effectively,' we *are* on a floating island!" Mia bit a fingernail.

"We're going to have to figure out how to island-hop eventually," she pointed out worriedly. Gareth smirked.

"No problem," he said cheerily. "You've got your boat, right, Picard?" Picard rolled his eyes in response.

"Yeah, it's nestled in my back pocket," he answered, punching him lightly across the shoulder.

"At any rate," Felix said, drawing his Levatine, "we need a direction, so..." He threw the blade spinning into the air and away from the Adepts, so none of them found themselves missing a head or gaining any unnecessary holes.
"...direction it points will be the direction we go."

"Good idea," Gareth commented, watching the blade reach the top of its arc and spin downward.

"I dunno," Jenna muttered loudly. "What if it..." Before she could finish, the blade returned to the ground, blade pointing down, so it stuck perfectly in the ground, pointing in no direction but down.

"...does that?" Mia asked, smiling slightly while finishing her sentence for her. Jenna sighed.

"I swear, men are getting to be so useless," she muttered, taking Mia's Clothos Distaff and spinning it into the air. "I doubt that'll stick in the ground."

"It will also point in two directions," Felix pointed out. Gareth smiled, pouncing on the opportunity,

"I swear, women are getting to be so-" He cut himself off quickly as he felt the temperature dip on one side of him and rise on the other, care of each of the female Adepts beside him.

"Yes?" Jenna asked sweetly, like sugar-coated venom.

"Look, the staff has landed!" Gareth said excitedly, pointing. Each girl gave him an enthusiastic smack across each arm and walked to see the direction the staff was pointing.

"You make it too easy for them," Picard smiled, following the girls. Gareth sighed.

Jenna bent over the staff. "Looks like it's pointing south," she said confidently.

"How do you know it's not pointing north?" Gareth asked, approaching them. Jenna and Mia glared at him. "Oh, yeah, it is pointing south," he offered meekly. They seemed satisfied.

Mia leaned over to reclaim her staff, and then cocked her head, puzzled. "What's this?" she wondered. Beside the spot where her staff landed lay a perfectly smooth rock, so smooth it reminded her of some of the stone-like Psynergy items that granted them additional Psynergy skills.

"Is it a Psynergy item of some sort?" Picard asked. Jenna picked it up and frowned.

"It doesn't feel like it... and it's not giving me anything special," she muttered. "But... it does feel really warm."

"That's... odd," Felix agreed. "May as well ditch it. Let's go, guys."

"No," Jenna said. "I want to hold onto it for awhile. Just a feeling I'm getting from it," she muttered mysteriously. "I don't know why..."

"That's fine," Mia said. "But we should move on."

"No problem," Jenna said cheerfully.

"Okay, then," Picard exclaimed. "Southward!"

- - - - -

"*Unleash Haze!*" Sheba cried. The djinni popped forward and unleashed targeting Feizhi, causing her to phase slightly out of sync with this dimension just as the chunk of wall crunched sickeningly against the ground. A moment later, Feizhi popped back into existence, completely unharmed.

"Sheba! Ivan!" Feizhi cried, running toward them and accepting Sheba in a deep embrace. "When did you get here?"

"About two seconds ago," Ivan commented dryly. Then, sarcastically, he added, "Actually, we were here for about five minutes, we just wanted to follow you and see how long it would take you to need our help." Sheba nudged him in the stomach.

"Are you okay? Where's Sean?" she asked. Feizhi drew back and looked down dejectedly. Ivan felt a churning in his stomach.

"That's... not a good sign," he muttered, his throat instantly drying and heart falling with worry. Sheba felt a slight welling behind her eyes, but ignored it, hoping against hope for the best.

Feizhi said nothing, but simply sat heavily on the ground staring down and fighting back tears. She tried in vain several times to compose herself. "I never thought..." she trailed, seemingly unable to form words. "It was so... quick, I just..." She tried to draw a deep breath, but it ended up being short and ragged. She swallowed hard.

"It's all right," Ivan said, already predicting the news without using his Jupiter abilities. "Let me see... to save you from telling us." He took Sheba's hand and cast Mind Read on Feizhi, pouring over the recesses of her mind, until they found what they were looking for.

A final, soulful attack, claiming the lives of the aggressors and the casters. Sheba gasped and pulled back from Ivan's hand, breaking the link.

"Oh... oh, Jupiter..." she said breathlessly. Ivan looked down, fighting a sting from behind his eyes, and clenched his fists.

"This is completely my fault..." he muttered. "Damn it!" Sheba reassuringly put a hand on his shoulder, somehow able to comfort him through even her own pain.

"If it's anyone's fault, it's Mokol's for putting us in this damned situation in the first place," she reasoned. "Was it...?"

Feizhi nodded. "Fighters. They're all dead, now, though. Sean saw to that."

They sat in silence for awhile, the thoughts now permeating their thoughts totally. Sean, dead? Losing Isaac was enough. Now two of their number were... gone. Gone forever.

Forever was a very long time...

"He went out... fighting. He always wanted to," Feizhi sniffled. "Actually, he didn't want to go out at all. But if he did, he said he wanted to take someone out with him. To go out fighting hard. He told me, 'If I have to die, I'll drag some people to hell with me, y'know?' ...and he did." Sheba just sniffled more, let loose a tear from her eye, then hugged Feizhi again.

"I don't think he did, Feizhi," she said softly. "It must be hard to drag someone to hell when you're... you're fated for heaven." Feizhi didn't answer, but she did smile ever so slightly.

- - - - -

"Hey, Jenna?" Gareth asked as they walked southward towards... well, it's anybody's guess, really.

"What is it?" she replied. Gareth handed her a fine thin sword that she knew all too well: the Masamune. She furrowed her brow in confusion. "What's this for? Isn't this Ivan's?"

"Not anymore... he gave it to me before we got separated. Turns out he prefers using a staff to a sword, he hasn't used it in ages," he said, shaking his head. "Poor kid."

"What's that have to do with me?" Jenna asked, already piecing it together.

"Well, you like killing things, right? Or at least grotesquely disfiguring them?" he said, not mincing words at all. Jenna

chuckled and nodded. "Well, a light blade might be good for you. Besides, I've heard from Ivan it has positively wicked weapon Psynergy." Jenna smiled and sheathed it over her back, then hugged Gareth warmly.

"You'll have to teach me how to use it, though," she said. Gareth laughed.

"I'm willing to put in as many late nights as it takes," he smiled mischievously. Jenna smirked and kissed him. Then she frowned.

"...how exactly did you hide this, anyway?"

Ta-dah! Chapter one, and the story unfolds anew.

(Char): Doesn't feel very 'anew'. Almost feels kinda 'old'.

What do you expect? It's a sequel. It picks up where the last one left off.

(Dew): I think I would have preferred the last one not being picked up. And then your keyboard set on fire, or broken over your head.

...you know, you're a medicinal djinni. You heal people.

(Dew): Don't remind me.

Oooo-kay. And on that happy note, please review! Tell me what you think, whether or not you like it, and/or if there's a difference between an opossum and a possum.

Okay, maybe not necessarily that last one.

***Chapter 2*: The Stone, the Woman and the Battlegroun...**

(Dew): You know what I think?

(Char): uhh.... no.

(Dew): I think we need something to spice up the muse section. It's been the same old tired bit for way too long.

(Char): Point taken. What do you suggest?

We could eliminate the muses altogether!

(Dew):

(Char): ...no.

Rats...

(Dew): I say we take the muse section in a new direction.

(Char): ...like?

(Dew): Film noir style.

(Char): ...

(Dew): Well?

(Char): I think we should move on to the reviews...

Review Responses:

Midnight C: Yes. You should be very, very worried. Worried like if Crystal on pixie stix. *Worried.*

Caster of Chaos: Mark my words, we will get the slugs. *We will.*

Akachi: Consider it updated. ...uhh... soon-ish...

A few hours had passed since the initial incident at the Mars/Jupiter Shrine. Ivan and Sheba had somehow forced themselves to get up and make lunch for the three of them through the pain of loss. Feizhi wanted to help, but somehow found herself unable to concentrate on the task.

She's... really down, isn't she? Sheba thought towards Ivan. He replied slowly.

Aren't you?

Sheba didn't reply right away, and when she finally did, her voice sounded distant and small, as though coming from places far away. *I can't quite... bring myself to understand it all, yet, y'know? I don't understand much about this world, the politics of it, the places and people, I just...*

Want to go home, huh? Ivan said, with no lack of Jupiter prediction finesse.

Definitely.

Ivan started to speak, but cut himself off quickly as a familiar twinge went through his mind. Sheba, linked to him, felt it as well, and when images started flowing in his mind's eye, they were reflected in hers, as well.

Images of a city, distant and yet feeling so close, bounced around their minds. The city was large and developed, as

though it existed in a place that hadn't been attacked by levelers in so long. The gates of the city were held in place by twin towering golden pillars. It was so well decorated that the name of the city was even carved into a golden arch supported by the pillars: 'Chefru'.

And as soon as it had started, it had ended, leaving their minds racing with questions and longing for answers. One thing they had felt, though, was an irresistible pull, calling them south.

"Did you feel...?" Ivan started, but Sheba's reply cut him off totally.

"I did. That city, and... that feeling," she said quietly, a distant look in her eyes.

"There's something there," Ivan replied. "It feels like... Mia and the others. But how-"

"Our abilities are developing," Sheba reminded him. "And we are sitting in a Jupiter-realm, right?" He nodded, smiling slightly despite all their hardships. "They're close. I can feel it."

"Me, too. Let's get Feizhi," he said decisively. Sheba shook her head.

"Why don't we eat first?" she said meekly, one hand resting delicately on her stomach. Ivan smiled.

"With you here, who needs Garet, huh?" Sheba beat him over the head with the Salamander Rod. Later she would argue that she was looking out for Feizhi's best interests, but she was too hungry to tell him at the moment. Ivan, rubbing his head, went back to his thoughts, duly aware of Feizhi

joining them to eat, thinking merely of the city with the bright golden arch.

- - - - -

"Ooh," Gareth said, looking up. "A bright golden arch," he commented, staring at the golden doorway that stood before the city of Chefru.

"Amazing," Picard said in awe. "It's an awesome achievement... look how high it stands! It's an incredible accomplishment to engineering!"

Gareth simply kept looking at it. "Heh... shiny..." Picard smacked him across the shoulder. "Ow! You know, my arms are gonna fall off at this rate."

Felix walked past him towards the gates, muttering just loud enough for them to hear, "Why couldn't it be your mouth?" Gareth crossed his arms and fumed, following him into the city.

If the city looked to be anything from the outside, then it was even more impressive from the inside. The streets were lined with people going about their business through pristine streets and clean-cut lawns, children running around playing, and effectively just people enjoying their lives. Mia stood in awe at how a city that could be so strong would refuse to lend aid to their neighbouring village when it was just a few hours walk away. Her thoughts were soon beaten out of her head, however, when a group of children ran past them, laughing and playing.

"Kinda makes you long for the good old days, huh?" Jenna smiled at her, holding the rock strangely protectively. Mia smiled.

"I didn't have the good old days, actually. I was always studying to be a healer," she admitted.

"Well... it paid off," Jenna complimented. "Now, come on... let's go shopping; there's gotta be some stores here somewhere!" Mia chuckled and the two walked casually to Felix. Jenna took the bag of gold in her free hand and ran off into the crowd.

"Just meet us at the... inn," Felix called to them, unsure if they heard him (or if they cared). The two disappeared into the distance, in search of good times (or at least, good bargains). "Wonderful..."

"If you'd like, I could go to keep an eye on them," Gareth offered, smiling. Felix smacked his arm.

"Over my dead bo-"

"Stop *doing* that!" Gareth exclaimed, rubbing his arm.

- - - - -

"So, what should we try and find?" Jenna asked, remotely giddy at the shopping experience.

"When did we turn into shopping freaks...?" Mia wondered.

"Somewhere in the middle of the whole 'Saving the world' thing, probably," Jenna admitted.

"Sounds about right," Mia agreed. "So, where to?" Jenna shrugged. "Do you need a new weapon?" Mia posed.

"Actually, Gareth just gave me this," she said, unsheathing the Masamune. Mia gasped.

"I didn't know you could use light blades!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"I don't," she admitted. "He said he'd help teach me." Mia giggled, despite herself.

"A lot of teaching going to happen there, I suppose," she laughed. Jenna flushed furiously, but didn't reply.

The two came across a marketplace set in the centre of the city and walked around, stopping at various shops and checking prices. They came across the weapons shop, but the only weapons being sold were maces that even Mia couldn't use, so they ended up settling for a pair of gloves for both of them.

After several hours of shopping, the two decided it was time to head back to the inn where they hoped the others would be waiting for them. On the way, a cloaked individual stepped out from the shadows of the alley and motioned to them to come closer. Jenna shot a quick glance at Mia, and the two slowly approached him, entering the alley cautiously.

"Hold onto the rock, please?" Jenna asked Mia, handing her the valueless stone and moving her right hand to take the hilt of the Masamune. "Can we help you?"

The cloaked figure moved strangely, swaying on his feet, wavering back and forth. When he spoke, the voice was rasp and distant.

"That," he said simply, pointing at the stone cradled in Mia's arms. He jerked a thumb back to himself. "Give it to me." Jenna's eyes flew over Mia again, resting momentarily on the stone, then returning, cold and fixed, toward the stranger.

"The stone is ours," she said quickly. "We aren't giving it away." The stranger swayed as though to move on them, but stopped.

"I must insist," he said, taking a step toward Mia, slowly. Jenna sidestepped into his path.

"I said it's ours," she said, her voice rising. "Now get out of here. Please," she added. Mia arched an eyebrow. Jenna had grown since they'd met; Mia could remember a time where an incident like this would cause Jenna to be in full pyromaniac mood, but her resolve had improved. The stranger either didn't notice Jenna's words or didn't care, for he suddenly reached out and grabbed her arm harshly, forcing her back a step.

"Give it to-"

"Remove your hand from me," Jenna growled, her free hand already having drawn the Masamune, "or I will remove it *for* you." Mia sighed slightly.

So much for resolved, she smiled. I hope she really means for and not from...

The stranger didn't care about her threats. With a swish of the cloak, he swung his free arm around like a hammer, intending to come down on Jenna hard. She agilely dodged it by stepping off to the side and raising the arm that he clasped, forcing him to block his own attack, and causing him to release her. Taking full advantage of the opportunity, Jenna kneed him as hard as she could in the stomach (which, all in all, wasn't that hard, but considering it was an unexpected stomach shot, even a tap from Feizhi would ground someone). He recoiled, and, sensing a golden opportunity, Jenna called out, '*Unleash Cannon!*' which sent him flying upside-down to the back of the alley. Cannon

hopped onto Jenna's head and rested awhile in her auburn hair.

"Can we go, now?" Mia asked. "Have you gotten that out of your system?" Jenna took a deep breath and then relieved her of the stone, then nodded, smiling. A groan from the back of the alley signaled that they should make their escape quickly, so they took off at a quick pace toward the inn.

"D'you ever get to thinking that our lives are way too complicated?" Jenna wondered aloud.

"Just another day in the life of your average heroes," Mia pointed out.

"Heroines," Jenna corrected.

"Naturally."

- - - - -

"Man, I am so tired," Gareth moaned, resting his head on the table. Picard sighed and leaned back in his chair. It was early evening, and the girls hadn't returned yet. The three of them were sitting around a table at the inn, the room starting to be illuminated by a fire burning in the fireplace. Gareth sat with his back to the door and the innkeeper's desk so he could stare into the fireplace without having to turn. He liked watching the flames dance; it reminded him of his own power, and, of course, of Jenna.

"Has there ever been a time that you didn't complain about... everything?" Picard asked him casually. Gareth frowned.

"Maybe there was this one time... no, no, never mind. Never," he said, scratching his head. Felix's eyes suddenly darted to the doorway.

"They're here," he said, pointing at a figure facing away from them with a familiar head of brilliant aqua hair at the entrance. Gareth turned around to greet them.

"Hey, Mia!" Gareth cried, to get her attention. She didn't reply. "Mia! Jenna!" No answer. "All right," he said, taking a wrapped straw from the table and unwrapping the end. "Now I'm annoyed. That's the last straw..." Picard looked puzzled.

"Are you honestly that angry?" he wondered.

"Huh?" Gareth asked. "No, it was the last straw," he said, pointing at the table, where no more straws lay. "It bugs me when we don't have enough..."

Felix groaned. "There are days I hate you..."

"Told you I'd grow on you one day," Gareth grinned, drawing a deep breath and aiming the straw at Mia. He blew heavily to shoot the wrapper off at her. A few seconds and an "*Ouch!*" later, she whirled at him and Gareth found himself deposited on the floor, care of a well placed burst of Wind Psynergy.

"Well, would you look at that?" Felix smiled. "That's not Mia at all..."

The woman marched toward them, and other than resembling Mia remotely from the back and wearing similar clothes, they could all tell easily that it was certainly not Mia.

"Where do you get off?!" she exclaimed. "You think you can just shoot things at random passerby? How *dare* you-"

"I'm sorry!" Gareth pleaded. "We thought you were someone else. Honestly!" She took a step back and casually took a deep breath, so as not to show she was as annoyed as she was.

"It was an accident," Picard said, using all his diplomatic flair to appease her. "Can you leave it be?" Her expression softened.

"Well... I guess so," she said, a hint of annoyance still in her voice. "That doesn't mean you can get up!" she said quickly, blasting Gareth back to the floor with more wind as he tried to rise. Gareth fumed, but Felix was doing his best to hold back waves of laughter.

"Please, join us," Picard offered. "At least for awhile, so you can see that we didn't mean to impose too much," he said genuinely. She smiled and sat at Gareth's place, satisfied.

"I won't stay long, I'm just stopping by," she informed them. "I'm heading east, myself, across the Doango mountains."

"What's the rush? Why are you heading there?" Felix asked curiously.

"Well, to be honest," she said, lowering her voice so that none would overhear, "I've heard there's a dreaded Shrine to the south... I can't stand those things."

"A Shrine, you say?" Picard said, his eyebrows raised. She nodded.

"I'd like to get as far away from them as I can... the propaganda of them scares me," she said. "But I'd also like

to stay away from Keunam, and that's due north from here. East seems like the best option. Right across the mountains, and then I'll see what's beyond..."

"Due south to a shrine," Felix muttered under his breath. "First thing in the morning... we're ready to go."

- - - - -

"Oh... my..."

Death and destruction, wreaked across a large area, outside what used to appear to be a village. The stench of prone bodies and carcasses tore through the nostrils of the three Jupiter Adepts. It was a nightmare.

But no one was asleep.

Nor would they be for a long while.

"Night is coming," Sheba said worriedly. Feizhi shuddered.

"We're not camping here," she said solidly.

"I agree. Let's get some distance, first," Ivan whispered loudly. Feizhi shuddered even harder.

"Forward... or back?"

"Let's go through. The faster we get past this, the better," Ivan said resolutely.

"If the smell makes me pass out, don't leave me here," Sheba said, with a hint of illness in her voice. Calling up whatever reserves of power he had through the stench, Ivan raised his hands.

"*Unleash Zephyr!*" he called, summoning the little Jupiter Djinni to boost their speed dramatically. The effects would last long enough for them all to run through the wasteland quickly, without spending too much more time in it. It was all Ivan could do to run past it and try to keep his thoughts away from it all.

But no matter how hard he tried, he would always wonder if his fate was somewhere here, laying among these broken shards of bone and weapon.

If this *was* his fate.

- - - - -

It was late. Felix was sound asleep in his bed. The Mia-lookalike had left already, not wishing to stay the night in the city for whatever reason, and the girls had returned back from their shopping spree (with, much to Felix's surprise, a heavy coin purse). The group had settled for a relaxing meal in the inn, then sat around the fireplace for a little while talking. Eventually, they had all decided together to travel south, towards a shrine that was supposed to be there. That, ultimately, was the problem with adventuring. Everything was *supposed* to be somewhere. It very rarely was.

Nor were cities as inviting as they seemed.

A knocking at the door of the boys room shook them right out of their slumber (or in Gareth's case, a Quake, care of Felix, shook him out of his slumber...). Picard opened the door to a distressed Mia, who welcomed him in the depth of night merely with the words, "The plaza's on fire!"

"What...?" Gareth moaned, stumbling awake. "Did you make Jenna really mad, or something...?" A solid *thwap* across his head from Felix silenced him.

"It's another leveler... but it's Mars-Aligned," Jenna said quickly, appearing behind Mia.

"Oh, good," Gareth said, yawning. "Picard and Mia can take care of it, then," he said.

"No, *we're* going to help," Jenna said, grabbing him by the ear and dragging him off to help. Gareth moaned.

"What do you expect me to do?"

"*We*," Jenna said as though it should be obvious, "are going to be the bait."

"...*what?!*"

- - - - -

(Char): ...I really hate the way you leave these things off.

(Dew): (in black and white)(aside) It was a cliffhanger. A bad cliffhanger, at that. One of those cliffhangers that left you wondering whether or not it was worth it to come back. I knew a cliffhanger like this once. Her name was Sue.

...what are you *doing*?

(Dew): (same) He wanted to know. Sure, the truth is here and waiting for him to listen, but I didn't know if he could take it. It's a bad town, sweetheart. It's a bad, bad town.

(Char): ...I think he's film noir-ing the muse section...

I'm scared.

(Dew): (same) Fear. Something I can't afford myself. There's something about this life that just makes me want to scream, but... that's not my job. I'm the responsible,

respected one. It's not my place to do that. Maybe... it's yours. It wasn't Sue's...

(Char): *Stop... talking...*

I agree.

(Dew): (same) They wanted to silence me, but I couldn't let myself- (drops from being hit in the head by a flying brick)

o.O

(Char): (smiling and holding another brick) Anyone *e/se* want a piece?

...no ma'am.

You really don't want to make her angry... you should review, just in case!

***Chapter 3*: Burning the Town Red**

(Dew): I reckon I done figured it out.

(Char): groans What is it this time?

(Dew): What we darn need, little missy, is to take this whole thing *western*.

(Char): ...what?

I agree. *What?*

(Dew): There's too many styles out there to choose from, out on them plains I been lopin' along... so I figure, let's just use the plains themselves...

...are you making *any* sense?

(Dew): Just 'bout as much as yer fic here does, pardner.

...ouch.

Review Responses:

Akachi: The Mia lookalike? Would I *ever* bring in a character without a reason? ...okay, yes, I would. Wait and see!

Caster of Chaos: I enjoy cliffhangers... they're nice and... cliff-hanger...y. Okay, I'll give you a break on cliffs in this chapter, all right? No immediate death threats or battles or anything.

Midnight C: *Noooo*. The stone? *Valuable*? *Whatever* gives you that idea? And keep your muses away, maybe I'll sic the Mia look-a-like on them. That'll give her a use...

"Why does something always happen *just* when I'm asleep?"
Garet wondered aloud, staring down the ruckus ahead of
them. Felix snorted.

"Maybe because if it weren't for the walking portion of our
journeys, you'd be asleep the whole time?" he said out of
the corner of his mouth. Garet smirked.

"Possibly..."

The group had wound their way quickly to the source of the
commotion, which wasn't hard to find; they basically ran
against the streams of panicked people (surprisingly many
considering the time; Chefru apparently had quite the night-
life). The fire in the plaza had spread considerably, but
wasn't quite yet out of the ability of Mia and Picard to put
out with well placed Douses.

"Do we have a plan?" Picard asked to no one in particular.
"I'd like to get those fires out, personally." The flames raged
a little higher, as though defying him. Garet blinked, then
turned on Jenna.

"Hey, yeah... who said I wanted to be bait, anyway?" he
asked indignantly. Jenna looked at him eye-to-eye, coolly.

"Me."

"Bait, it is," Garet said, cracking his knuckles and advancing
to the leveler, unaware of Picard catching Felix's eye and
making a faint whipping noise.

The leveler itself was unlike the other ones the group had
fought. Whereas the other three they had tackled previously

were all shaped like enormous cuttles and distinctly Jupiter-aligned, it was made clear by the way the beast had set fire to everything that this one was a Mars-aligned leveler. It stood on all fours, remotely like any given quadruped, a cat or dog, but a pair of burly arms protruded from its back. It had a mane around its neck made of brilliantly licking flames, that extended over its head to give it a crown of furious fire. It had two tails, each of which was lit at the end. The beast was pitch black in colour, as though made of ash, so that the only way the group was able to see it was by its own flaming body. And, of course, by the light given off from the burning city.

"Picard and I can handle the flames," Mia said. "Can you handle... *it*?" she asked Felix planning every detail of the battle before they'd even moved. Felix nodded.

"I think we can take care of it ourselves," he agreed. "Just hurry up and put out the fires; Jenna will be mad if Gareth gets too crispy."

"Scared of Jenna?" Picard asked smugly.

"...aren't you?" Each looked at the other and shared a long look that said 'when did this group fall into the hands of a pyromaniac?' then moved on, Picard to douse flames and Felix to douse the beast.

Actually, Gareth and Jenna weren't doing too badly on their own. The leveler was spewing fire (and occasionally smoke) over them, but Jenna was nimble and managed to dodge each incoming attack, while Gareth simply decided to absorb each blow and rely solely on Jenna's Aura abilities. She wasn't impressed.

"*Aura!*" she cried for what felt like the fifteenth time in a very short battle. "Honestly, Gareth, can't you just *move*?"

"It's just fire, it doesn't hurt much," he said casually. "My fire hurts me more than that, and I don't hit myself with it!" Jenna blinked.

"Actually, wasn't there that one tim-"

"We never shall speak of that again!"

Felix jumped into the foray and unsheathed his Levatine, dancing in and out of incoming fireballs and finally scoring a direct slash across the side of the leveler. Though the leveler shook with pain, the Levatine started ringing out as though in pain, and Felix noticed that contact with the beast had caused his blade to become superheated. Another strike might melt the blade itself. He made a subconscious note of that and waited for it to cool off before sheathing it.

Jenna decided to take the opportunity while the leveler was distracted to try using her weapon Psynergy. "Garet!" she called out. "How do I use this thing?"

"Each one's a little different," he replied across the raging field of flame. "Just focus on the sword, and your opponent, and then... use it!" Felix furrowed his brow and shook his head at him.

"That had to be the worst explana-" he cut himself off at seeing the Masamune's Rising Dragon Psynergy (although a very, *very* weak version of it) nibble at the leveler's heels. "...how?"

"Don't ask, just accept," Garet offered sagely. Jenna squealed in delight at getting the sword to work properly, then waved her hand almost casually and sent a Dragon Fume headed toward its face.

"I'm loving this sword," she said as she fired. "Nice and destructive." Felix sidestepped over to Gareth.

"Way to go," he muttered. Gareth looked at him, puzzled. "D'you really want her to be able to use that next time she's mad at you?" A look of horror crossed Gareth's face, he glanced at Jenna, and then looked at Felix.

"...Oh, Mars..."

Meanwhile, Picard and Mia were dashing from building to building, Dousing flames and extinguishing burning treetops with bursts of Mercury Psynergy. Already Picard had raised the idea that there might be people trapped in buildings they were passing, but Mia told him their first priority was dousing as much of the fire as they could.

"We can send in Gareth and Jenna once they're done over there," she proposed. "I'm sure they'd love it." Picard frowned.

"They may be Mars Adepts, but they're still human. Fire burns, no matter what balance of Alchemy runs in your blood," he reminded her, grounded as always. "You or I would have more luck exploring because we could Douse whatever we need to." Mia reluctantly nodded, then turned on her heel and bolted into the nearest building. "I didn't mean *now*!" Picard cried after her.

The leveler released a mighty roar and spewed burning flames from its mouth, just nearly missing Felix as he rolled out of the way. Using its intense speed that came from its sleek dog-like build, it rushed at Jenna and grabbed her with the arms that protruded from it back, swung her over its body in a wide arc and flung her off into the distance. She collapsed heavily on the ground, and was very slow to move, though she did stir. Gareth fired fireballs back at the leveler in

response to buy Jenna time to recover fully, while Felix sent a Ragnarok hurtling at it from the heavens. The sword cut a large gash across its back, and removed one of the arms completely. Garet managed to move in while it was distracted with pain and cut off the other arm without being counterattacked. The leveler howled at it, shot a final fireball at him which caught him squarely in the arm, then ran away, sensing nothing but defeat left for it.

Favouring his left arm, Garet moved over to Jenna, helping her to her feet until Felix made his way to them to cast Cure. The three of them were significantly more tired than when they had sat down to sleep a few hours ago, but none were any worse for the wear. It looked like the rest was up to Picard and Mia.

"Hey..." Garet asked while Felix tended to Jenna, "anybody see Mia?"

- - - - -

The kindhearted Imilian healer had her sleeve pressed up against her face in order to thwart smoke in the building she'd entered. The fire was raging, but still within range of being controlled for a Mercury Adept. Casting Douse as she went (and fighting increasing fatigue every step of the way), the woman who was as dedicated as she was beautiful made her way deeper and deeper into the building. The farther she went, however, the more apparent it became that there was nobody left inside the building. *Great... just wasting my time*, Mia realized.

She turned around to find her way out as quickly as possible, but as she turned, she caught the sleeve of her robe on a half-burnt and splintered section of wall. Starting to panic a little, she frantically jerked her arm from the wall

and started running down the hallway, but screeched to a halt when she felt her ring slide off her hand. She bent down to pick it up, and in the split-second it took her to stop and bend down, the ceiling collapsed in front of her. It crashed in the exact spot that she would have been standing in had she not stopped to recover her ring.

"Isaac..." she whispered aloud, pausing for a moment to stare at her ring shining in the firelight. Then she remembered where the firelight was coming from and bolted out of the building before her luck (or guardian angel?) left her.

- - - - -

It took another hour for Mia and Picard to Douse all the flames. That was mostly because there were a few houses that were so demolished that they couldn't save, and when Gareth moved to burn the remaining scraps of wood so no one would be hurt on them, he overdid it and accidentally started burning the neighbouring partially burned houses. Needless to say, Jenna and Felix dragged him back to the inn to sleep. Funny thing is, Gareth didn't complain.

The townsfolk returned shortly after the glow of the fire went out, which they correctly assumed meant it was safe to return. Thanks to the efforts of the Adepts, the city was saved, a rare victory for the group. There was only major damage to a few houses, and the plaza itself was only partially damaged. As the townsfolk agreed, it was nothing that couldn't be remedied by a few days of hard work, so Picard and Mia were gratefully thanked for tackling everything single-handedly (as Felix and the others were nowhere in sight, having retreated to the inn) and allowed to return otherwise unhindered.

Morning came all too soon for the Adepts the next morning, as they only got a few more hours of sleep before Sol rose and woke them all again. Jenna rose quite sore from her short flight and Mia had a bit of a headache from the smoke, but it was Gareth that complained because of his lack of sleep. Go figure.

The group got up and assembled in the inn's dining lounge once Gareth was fully awake (although Felix usually joked that he was half-asleep all the time, anyway). They headed for the south entrance to the city after a light breakfast, which, in Gareth's case, was effectively a heavy breakfast that puts a normal person down for a two-hour nap. Jenna and Mia could have sworn they saw a certain cloaked individual in the alleys on their way, but nothing came of it, so they forced it out of their minds, Mia glancing at her ring, and Jenna holding onto the stone and Gareth's arm even closer.

Actually, for whatever reason she couldn't possibly know, the stone that she was carrying around was heating up. An odd feeling in her stomach told her something would eventually come of it, but she couldn't for the life of her tell if it would bring something good or bad.

Finally, the group arrived at the south entrance to Chefru. An endless stretch of plains lay in front of them, Sol off in the distance, signifying there was a full day to walk onward.

"There's a shrine somewhere due south," Felix said, in full leader mode.

"A shrine... and hopefully the others," Mia commented quietly, hoping they were all still all right.

"We'll find them," Picard said resolutely. "As long as the four of them are smart and stick together, I don't think anything

will happen to them." Jenna simply nodded.

"Let's go, then. Hello, Ivan, Sheba, Feizhi and Sean. Good-bye, Chefru."

- - - - -

"Hello, Chefru," Ivan said, staring up at the golden arch that signaled the northern entrance to Chefru.

"I'm glad we were able to make it here so quickly," Sheba said. "Maybe now we'll find something that helps us locate the others." Feizhi stayed silent, then nodded her assent.

"It kind of looks like there was an accident here... the people seem on edge," she noted.

"We'll just have to pay attention to everything," Sheba said. "Mind reading, then."

"Yup," Ivan said. "We'll find something... I hope."

- - - - -
- - - - -

(Dew): Wait, wait, wait... they just...

(Char): Left? And then the others just...

(Dew): Arrived? At opposite ends of the city?!

(Char): They're *so freaking close!* That's not *fair!*

Hehe... well, life's annoying sometimes. At least it made Dew forget his western-style.

(Dew): I reckon it's about time to rope me up a little doggie.
starts swinging a lasso around

...ack! (runs)

(Char): Between killing Dew for the accent and mangling Omniflyer for the plot... I have my hands full... just please review so I don't have to worry about that, okay?

***Chapter 4*: So Near, and Yet, so Far**

(Dew): All right, the new direction we're taking the muse section in is-

(Char): clobbers Dew with a giant mallet

(Dew): x.x

Uhh... what was that for?

(Char): I'm tired of his suggestions. When a section has *me* in it, you don't *need* anything else.

...I'm going to move this along before I say something, and then you do something *I'll* regret.

Review Responses:

Caster of Chaos: I'm running a school? Crap! *Taxes!!*

Midnight C: Everyone... *might* become reunited... *eventually*... and Mia's luck... *might*... mean something... *eventually*... but do I want to give it all away right now? It would ruin my cliffhanger-ing opportunities!

"So, before we start looking," Sheba said, walking side-by-side with the other two Jupiter Adepts along the city streets, "is there anything that we'll particularly need to buy?" Ivan stopped and leaned on a wall to think, cutting his cheek on a jutting brick that he somehow hadn't seen in the process. Feizhi shook her head.

"I'd say healing items, to start," she commented dryly. Ivan blushed, but agreed, while Sheba simply smiled at him and gently tapped his arm in a playful "you're-an-idiot" sort of way. The group wandered the streets of Chefu until they came across the plaza. Much of it was fire damaged, but the shops that were essential to them weren't damaged enough to be closed.

Dipping into his reserve funds, Ivan purchased a full supply of Herbs and divided them amongst their group of three. Ivan glanced over the girls armour as they put their Herbs away and offered, "Maybe we should worry more about our armour, too." Sheba looked at his light armour, which was severely cracked along the side, and suggested the same.

"All right, then. Armour shop," she said, and the group walked off in another aimless direction, looking for the next place they could buy from.

They wandered into an alley, hoping to find a connecting passage into another section of the plaza, but were abruptly stopped by a strange man, clothed in a dark cloak that covered his whole body. The cloaked stranger approached them, swaying very slightly, and demanded, "Do you have one?" Ivan didn't reply, but merely furrowed his brow. With a subtle nod to Sheba, he attempted to distract him for a little while, buying Sheba time to use to probe his mind to see if he was a threat.

"Have one what?" Ivan asked levelly. Sheba blinked twice, and then reached backwards to share the link with Feizhi, as though she couldn't believe what she was seeing in his mind and wanted verification.

"Do you have a-

"They were here!" Sheba exclaimed, cutting him off entirely. "This guy encountered Jenna and Mia yesterday!"

"And was horribly rude, as well," Feizhi bristled. The man swayed more.

"What do you expect?" he questioned. "They think it's a *stone*! A normal, bloody *stone*!"

"A sto- what is he talking about?" Ivan asked Sheba, cutting himself off with little provocation. Sheba took his hand.

"Here," she said, extending her mind to his and showing him the events of yesterday. Their minds linked, Ivan saw the encounter from the perspective of the man, in every detail. He watched as the man advanced on Jenna, as she took the Masamune protectively and guarded the stone, and as she knocked him back with a burst of attacks.

"Hmm... effective combo. And it looks like Garet finally got around to giving her that blade," Ivan commented. "Jenna and the Masamune, oh, that's scary..."

"Forget that, did you see their so-called stone?" Feizhi said excitedly. "Did you see what it was?"

"Oh..." Ivan said, traveling back into his thoughts to look over the memory again. This time he paid attention to the item, and used the man's memories to decipher exactly what the girls were safeguarding. "Oh, it's a... wow," he said breathlessly. "That's cool. That's really, really cool."

"I know, hmm?" Sheba said happily. "Won't they be surprised?"

"According to legend," the man said, "they're found on wasted battlegrounds, and only if they are treated with

extreme care and attention will they-"

"That won't be a problem," Ivan commented. "The way those two seemed to be protecting it, it shouldn't take long at all for it to-"

"This is so exciting!" Feizhi interrupted, unable to hold in her excitement any longer. "Not only were they just here yesterday and we have a good chance to catch up with them if we move quickly, but there's a good chance that when we *do* catch up to them, they'll have a-"

"At any rate," the man said, swaying a little less now, "if you do catch up to them-"

"*When*," Sheba interjected.

"When, of course," he corrected himself. "When you catch up to them, please tell them I'm sorry for how I treated the two of them yesterday. I was... well... I suppose you could say a... a wee bit... drunk?"

"...a wee bit?" Ivan asked unbelievably. "I'm surprised *you* could tell it wasn't a stone," he laughed.

"At any rate, we should go," Sheba said suddenly. "We should get there to warn them about it... you know, just so they aren't totally surprised when it-"

"Yeah," Ivan said, just a bit too quickly. "We should."

"Thank you for your assistance," Feizhi said, bowing. "I shall tell them that you didn't mean any harm." The man could have been smiling under his cloak, but they couldn't tell, at any rate.

"I believe they would have rested at the inn overnight; perhaps you can find more information there," he offered by way of leaving. They thanked him again and headed off to explore the city a little more, keeping an eye out for the inn.

They did a little more mind-reading and found out that the accident that had occurred had involved a strangely aligned leveler (Mars, they assumed, due to the fire damage) and at least Mia and Picard, as many of them had seen the pair of Mercury Adepts at the scene.

Eventually the trio wound their way to the inn (the excitement of finding Mia's group had completely erased the idea of getting new armour from their minds) to find more information. They headed off to speak to the innkeeper behind his desk for more clues.

"Have you seen anybody like this?" Ivan asked once the introductions were made. He then launched into a quick description of each of their comrades. The innkeeper nodded.

"Yeah, they stayed here last night," he said. "Ate just over there, at that table," he nodded. Ivan gave the same unnoticeable nod to Sheba, telling her to Mind Read for more info while he kept him talking.

"Can you remember where they said they were going? We got separated from them, and we're trying to catch up," he explained.

"Yeah... the blue-haired one... the girl, I mean... she mentioned something about going east... it was just loud enough for me to hear," the innkeeper recalled. Sheba Mind Read him for a split second, then nodded to Ivan, showing that his words were true.

"Thank you, sir," Ivan said courteously. "That helps us a great deal." The three of them left the inn quickly. Sol was only at midday, so they had plenty of time to catch up if the group only left this morning.

"Are we sure they left to the east?" Feizhi wondered. Sheba nodded.

"Positive," she said. "Here, I'll show you... I didn't get much, though. People are strangely resistant to Mind Read in this realm... but I did get enough." She took both of their hands and linked to their minds, recalling the image.

They saw the scene in the inn in their minds, to be played as many times as they wanted. They saw Mia, facing away from them towards the fireplace, sitting down at the table, with Gareth strangely on the floor and Felix and Picard already seated. The inn was quiet enough that they could hear her say, "I'm heading east, myself. Across the Doango Mountains." Either the inn got louder or they started speaking quieter, because they couldn't hear much else. Gareth got up and sat at the table, and the memory ended just as Mia started to rise.

"Okay. That'll do it," Ivan agreed. "They must have gone east."

"I wonder what's east... and where was Jenna?" Feizhi wondered. Ivan frowned.

"Something wrong?"

"Just a weird feeling. It's nothing," Feizhi said, shrugging and shaking her head, sending her hair flying behind her. "We should go if we're going to catch up."

"All right," Sheba agreed. "Let's go east."

- - - - -

Sol was nearly down across the Seula plains as Mia's group made their way across it. The plains were long, but at the pace the group was accustomed to walking, they had managed to get across it by sunset. Before them stood a majestic shrine, coloured in stone of Red and Yellow.

"We've found one!" Jenna cried out, running ahead, still clutching the stone in her arms. "A shrine, it has to be! Look at the structure!" Picard was a little more grounded, but he felt optimistic as well.

"It is strangely familiar to the Elemental Lighthouses... I think this is the real thing," he agreed.

"Awesome!" Gareth exclaimed, running towards it. "Let's get there so we can camp there tonight, and climb it in the morning!" He bolted toward the Shrine, then, suddenly stopped, pitched forward, wheeled his arms to correct himself and fell backwards. "Ack!"

"What is it?" Jenna cried, worried.

"Not... good!" he replied.

The others reached where he had stopped and their hearts sank. The plains acted as a disguise. The path to the shrine was a bit more complicated than they had first thought. They had come to the end of an island, and the Shrine that was so close lay on another island, much too far to cross by conventional methods.

The island the Shrine sat on was relatively small. It was roughly diamond shaped, as though all the dirt was funneled into that shape over time. The vegetation on the island was sparse, and the few plants that were there looked sick and

deprived of water. On the underside of the island, large roots were sticking out, dangling from the bottom and side and swaying with the wind, giving the impression that they were consciously moving and searching for water to absorb. Just looking at it made some of them thirsty.

"Well... that's just not useful at all," Felix muttered, looking down at the sulfuric and lava-ridden surface of the planet.. "Bloody useless." Picard smiled.

"Yes... generally if something isn't useful, it *is* useless, thanks so much for pointing that out," he quipped.

"I see a sign," Jenna pointed out, waving her hand in the direction of a plaque off to their left, which lay parallel to the end of the island. "Maybe that's useful?" she suggested. Mia walked over calmly.

She studied it and read the words, "The Grand Seula Island Bridge," aloud. "It's inscribed here, but... that's it. Nothing else."

"There's no bridge here," Gareth pointed out, with all the finesse of a Mars Adept.

"Nope," Picard agreed. Jenna shook her head and was about to speak, but something else caught her attention.

"Ow... this stone is getting hot!" she complained. Mia moved in and examined it.

"You're right," she agreed. "It's... oh... *Mercury*, it's cracked!" Jenna gasped.

"How can it be cracked?! I've barely let it out of my sight!" she exclaimed. "There's no way! Unless it... *Garet!*"

"It wasn't me!"

"Well... maybe this is a good thing?" Picard offered meekly.
Felix shook his head grimly.

"A random item that *Jenna* is attached to is unusually hot, as in, heated in a *bad way*, and cracked, as in, broken in a *bad way*," he said summarily. Picard pursed his lips and stepped back.

"...that's not useful at all."

"Bloody useless..."

(Dew): x.x

It's a lot more peaceful with him unconscious.

(Char): I agree. I should do that more often.

Yup.

(Char): To you, I mean. For the plot twists.

Eeeee... this is not good...

But what *would* make it good is if you (yes, *you!*) reviewed!
So why not? It's not gonna hurt, and it's perfectly tax deductible! I might even give you a mail-in rebate...

***Chapter 5*: The stone cracks! Enter the**

(Char): Quick question here.

(Dew): Yeah?

(Char): Why have we been letting him get away with these horrible plot twists and cliffhangers and what-have-you?

(Dew): I have... a buck-fifty, actua-

(Char): *Figure of speech!* I don't *care* what you have!

(Dew): Oh. In that case, no idea.

I have no idea either, but for the record, I'm not gonna complain.

(Char): First time for everything.

Speaking of which... the reviews!

(Dew): We've done that before.

...shut... up...

Midnight C: Yeah, I... kinda designed that one to be an "ARGH" chapter... sorry about that! Don't worry, explanations beckon!

Taiga: Isn't it *supposed* to go from bad to worse, to worse-er?

Caster of Chaos: Yes. Yes, I do. Hehehe...

"Define 'hot'," Gareth asked meekly, trying to help but at the same time trying to stay well out of range of Jenna's wrath in case all went sour very quickly. "Like, are we talking... lukewarm hot or... 'me' hot?"

"Yeah," Felix said, rolling his eyes, "lukewarm or polar cold?" Gareth scowled at him good-naturedly, but didn't reply. Jenna just turned the stone over in her hands, looking at it over and over from every possible angle as though to determine exactly what was wrong with it.

"Maybe because we're so close to the Shrine..." Jenna trailed off, shooting out any ideas that wandered into her head. Mia shook her head vigorously, sending streams of cerulean hair off dancing behind her.

"Can't be," she replied. "That shrine looks like it's made of Yellow and Red stones, both of which are rare elements in this realm. That's a random stone we picked up, it would be Jupiter-Aligned, if anything."

"But how did it get cracked?" Picard asked her, puzzled. Mia didn't answer right away, but instead shot a shifty glance at Gareth.

"I didn't *do* it!"

Jenna suddenly gasped. "It's... moving! I'm gonna drop it!" she cried out.

"Don't you dare!" Mia bristled. "There's *something* special about it, we just don't know what. We can't afford to break it!" Jenna juggled it between her hands as the stone somehow squirmed between her hands. Jenna pulled it into

her chest to hold it steady and glanced down at it. The crack was growing steady larger somehow. In fact, Jenna found that she could look clear inside the stone, like it was hollow. No... not hollow, it looked like something was in it...

"Oh!" Jenna squealed with utter delight, holding the stone in her outstretched palms for them all to see. "I can't believe it!" Mia moved closer.

"What is it?" she asked, peering into the crack. "Oh, my..." she cupped her hands over her mouth and smiled widely. "I can't believe it!"

"*What* isn't there to believe?!" Gareth burst. "I'm *totally* confused." Jenna balanced the stone in one hand and lifted a finger on the other hand to her lips to silence him.

"Look... it's cracking more, you can see!" When she had finished speaking, the crack in the stone had grown larger and larger until it effectively cracked into two halves and fell from Jenna's hands. Felix and Picard had already each guessed and were one step ahead of Gareth, but even he knew what the stone was now.

It was an *egg*.

Laying down on its side, fit neatly in Jenna's palms, was an adorable, tiny pegasus. Even from birth, it had a pure white coat that neatly and perfectly covered its body from its neck to its hooves. It had a very minute, frail set of wings that were neatly tucked against its body, too weak to move (or, more likely, it just didn't know how to use them yet). It moved its tiny eyes around, searching the area (which was basically Jenna's hands, cupped into a nice cradle for it) and getting used to its sense of sight. It finally craned its lilliputian head *way* up to look at her face, then yawned and let out a little mew like a little kitten. It rested its head down

on her hands and closed its eyes again, stretching slowly and adjusting to its body.

All of this, of course, while Jenna and Mia were pouring over it and ohh-ing and aww-ing in a style that only baby-watching ladies could.

"It's... so... *cute*!" Jenna said, smiling like a madwoman. Gareth, Picard and Felix, having seen the hatchling, wisely took a few steps back to give it room to breathe a little. And of course, to not crowd the ladies as they enjoyed seeing their little newborn.

"I can't believe we have a pegasus hatchling... we're so lucky!" Mia commented breathlessly. "It's amazing!"

"I wonder what to call it," Jenna wondered. "Maybe I'll name it-"

"*Umm...*" Picard interjected loudly from the male section a good three metres away. "Maybe... Mia or Felix or someone else should name it..."

"Why?" Jenna asked indignantly. "Why can't I name the pegasus?" Gareth rocked on his heels, silent. Felix took the lead.

"It's just that... well," he stuttered bravely. "I... uhh..."

"Shalex," Gareth blurted, which came accompanied with an involuntary shudder from the other two males. Jenna blushed.

"Shalex was a *great* name for an evil megalomaniac!" she cried out. "What's wrong with Shalex?!" The others shuddered.

"Mia, you're naming the bloody thing," Felix ordered. "Let Jenna help you if you want."

"It *is* her pegasus, you know," Mia pointed out. "She *did* bring it all this way and hatch it. She has the right to name it."

"Not by the laws of decency of any human audio canal," Felix countered. Jenna looked pleadingly at Gareth.

"You're on my side... aren't you?" she asked with huge, dinner plate sized eyes. Gareth squirmed.

"Augh.. I'm caught between my girlfriend and my sense of decency..."

"Your sense of decency is telling you to go against your girlfriend?"

"My head hurts..."

"More importantly," Picard interrupted loudly, jarring Gareth and Jenna out of yet another verbal spar (in which Gareth was so easily and continually outmatched), "what are we going to do about the pegasus?" Jenna blinked.

"What do you mean, 'what are we going to do about the pegasus'?" she asked, as though the question didn't even deserve an answer. "We're going to raise it."

"We're on a dangerous journey here," Picard reminded her. "The pegasus is a *baby*. How do you expect to keep it safe on a journey like this? What happens when we get in a battle?" he asked, eyeing the pegasus with a mix of pity and joy at new life. "How do you intend on saving it when half of the time we can barely save ourselves?" Jenna pursed her lips indignantly.

"When was the last time I needed rescu-"

"Battle against the leveler in Chefru," Picard answered quickly, not backing down in the slightest. "It's better for it if we don't bring it along." Felix fixed a knot in his scarf so it lay evenly against his back, then tapped Picard on the shoulder.

"Actually, as much as I hate to say it, it would be better off with us," he said levelly and softly. "It's too young to fend for itself, and it's too weak to do much of anything. Since Jenna did hatch it, we are responsible for it until it's strong enough to take care of itself." Picard's eyes widened at him, but he didn't say much in response.

"Darn Venus Adepts and your bloody sense of responsibility," he muttered. Mia stood up and cocked her head at Garet.

"Why is everything so 'bloody' these days?" she asked with a smile on her face. Garet shrugged.

"There's a joke in there somewhere, but I don't feel like pissing off Picard, Felix *and* Jenna."

"Point taken."

"Fine," Jenna said, exasperated and defeated, "I'll work *with Mia* to name it. Happy?"

"Very," Felix nodded, but Mia frowned and pursed her lips.

"Can't be an 'it', can it? I mean... are we talking about a male or female pegasus, here?" she wondered aloud, head cocked and eyebrows arched slightly. Jenna glanced at the pegasus and turned back to her.

"Male," she said definitively. Mia nodded.

"I wonder what you call a Male pegasus..." she wondered aloud, lost in thought again. Gareth, meanwhile, crossed his arms and walked to the edge of the island with Picard, gazing longingly at the Shrine's island.

"At any rate," he muttered, "we're still stuck," he commented dryly. Picard turned away and moved to set up a camp.

"Looks like we're stuck, *for now*," he muttered. "We'll just have to wait here for now, and then either figure out a way across or leave it for later." He started unpacking the cooking materials for supper, and took another longing look at the Shrine before getting down to work. Felix left the girls to their work and came over to help him.

"Still, I'd rather not have to leave it behind," Felix muttered. "There has to be a way to get there, we just have to figure out what it is that the 'Grand Seula Island Bridge' sign means, and then work from there."

"Maybe Seula is the name of this region? These plains?" Gareth offered, helping Picard set up the firewood. "And if there's a Grand Seula Island Bridge, then there must be a bridge that can be build to get us from here to the other island."

"Yes," Felix said slowly, tending to his long ponytail which was becoming uncharacteristically dirty, "or... maybe there was a bridge here once and it has since crumbled and fallen to the planet."

"But then there's no way across," Gareth said nervously. Felix nodded.

"Now you're getting the idea," he replied.

"A shrine we can't reach, and a bridge that doesn't seem to exist," Picard summarized, sighing heavily.

"It's-"

"If you say 'bloody useless' one more time, Felix, I'll pin that as a catch phrase for you and forever label you as a pessimist," Garet cut him off in mid-sentence.

"...wonderful."

- - - - -

"It's... c-c-c-*cold!*" Ivan chattered, shivering inside his cape, trying to keep it positioned so that it covered as much of his body as possible. Sheba sneezed quietly, and Feizhi was progressing as quietly and with as much dignity as she could muster.

The group was a fair march from Chefru now (they had gained some extra distance as Ivan occasionally unleashed Zephyr to pick up their speed). They had long since entered the Doango mountain range, and found a path leading up the side of the first mountain. The higher they went, however, the slower they were able to progress and the lower the temperature dipped. Furthermore, with Sol lowering and the day ending, their travelling quickly became a race against time *and* the weather.

"It's... *really* cold," Sheba managed to say coherently, shivering to the bone. She was shaking quite badly. Being raised in the desert, Sheba was by no means used to extreme cold weather. She had managed to deal with their adventure to Prox just barely, especially because Mia and Picard were more than willing to share Plies to keep her

strength up. This, however, was an entirely different scenario, the three of them being alone on a mountain face, none of them being experienced healers (or, indeed, having any healing Psynergy). While Ivan and Feizhi were cold, but able to withstand the temperature shifts, Sheba was stumbling with every step.

"Just... try focussing on other things!" Ivan called back to her. "Think about how you're not here at all, but you're actually... back in Lalivero!" he cried over the wind, trying to coax her into warmer thinking.

"I'm a... Jupiter Adept...! It's hard to trick... my own... mind...!" she cried back, stumbling over the words now as much as she was stumbling over her own feet.

"Focus on your own strength of character," Feizhi advised. "When the body is in peril, the mind can overcome and protect it. That's what I was taught, anywa-choo!" she sneezed. Sheba tried pulling into her own cloak more, but it simply wasn't thick enough to keep the winds from biting at her.

Ivan? she cried out with her mind.

Yeah?

...promise me something?

Okay...

I don't know if I can take this cold... much longer, she admitted fearfully. Please... don't let me die out here... please?

Ivan turned back to look at her, and saw a glimpse of fear he wasn't used to seeing in her eyes, but didn't answer her

immediately. Instead, he waited a second for her to catch up to him, and took off his cape and draped it over her to shield her from the wind. Then he started walking again, shaking more visibly, but resolute.

I promise.

They moved on for a few more minutes, but now Ivan was stumbling. Without the protection of his cape, the winds bit into him even more severely than they were hitting either of the other two, and it was easily taking its toll on him. He started rocking back and forth with each step, and his lips were turning to a deep blue. His skin was becoming deathly white, and Sheba and Feizhi noted his deteriorating condition with every step he took. Suddenly, Feizhi pointed upwards and howled over the furious winds, "Above! A shelter!" On a peak that looked reachable within the next few minutes was a tower. Unable to determine what the tower was or what purpose it served, the group simply decided to walk onward and upward, hoping to make it there soon before disaster befell them.

"Any port... in... a..." Ivan managed to say, but he collapsed against the snow, tripping over his own feet before he could say any more. He lay unmoving and face-down in the snow, his cheeks pale white, and lips blue. Sheba surmised he was frostbitten and had hypothermia, but she wasn't a healer, so she couldn't tell.

"Help me," she cried, grabbing part of Ivan's body and letting Feizhi take the other half. The two started dragging him up the mountain and closer to the tower, hoping to get him out of the cold, but they had barely gone twenty paces when they suddenly had to stop.

A pack of six canines were standing directly in their path, looking mangy and flea-bitten, but certainly more suited to this atmosphere than the two conscious women and the unconscious Jupiter Adept.

"This can't be... I've heard of these even on Weyard," Feizhi chattered through her teeth. Sheba looked curiously at her.

"What are they?"

"Tundra wolves."

"This isn't a tundra."

"If you want to move them *to* a tundra, be my guest. I don't think *they* have any plans over going anywhe-choo!"

The wolves, apparently, *did* have plans on moving, as they advanced menacingly on the group, eventually circling them, baring their gleaming sharp teeth and growling. They barked at each other, and it didn't take a genius to understand their message:

Oh, look. Supper.

(Dew): Ooh. Wolves. That's new.

(Char): Not just any wolves. *Tundra* wolves.

(Dew): ...on a mountain.

Shush.

(Dew): Wolves of a *tundra*... on a *mountain*.

... stop that.

(Dew): Wolves of a-
throws the brick

(Dew): x.x

(Char): When did we get that brick, anyway?

A few chapters back.

(Char): ...where did we get it from?

The wall, I think.

(Char): ... doesn't the wall kinda... *need* that?

...uhh... depends on where it's from...

(Char): Middle of the wall, sort of thing?

... ..interesting.

But not quite as interesting as reviewing! So try that out!

And there's even an interactive portions of today's review!
I'm accepting submissions for a name for the cute little baby pegasus. I've got ideas, but unless I get some better ones I might have Jenna name it. And you know that *that* means!

***Chapter 6*: Long Distance Help and Hindrance**

Welcome ba-

(Dew): *Tundr-*

Shut up!

(Char): Has he been on your case about that *all week*?!

(Dew): *Tundra-*

(throws the brick)

(Char): Ahh... silence.

(sings) Silence is golden, golde-

(Char): *Get back to work!*

Ackpth!

Review Responses:

Caster of Chaos: How do you "sorta" disconnect someone's jawbone and head? Isn't it sorta... disconnected or connected? Anyway, that's one vote for... *Shalex*, eh? Oh... a *sarcastic* vote... hmm...

Taiga: Hehe... Cliff is a cool name... My hat's off to you. That's clever.

Midnight C: Mammals, huh? ...you're doing that common sense thing again, aren't you? And Icarus is an interesting name... he's the one that got burned by the Sun, right? I

wonder how fitting that would be, considering it will be *Jenna* who spends all of her time mothering it... Flame-broiled Pegasus, anyone?

"This is not good," Feizhi muttered just loud enough for Sheba to hear over the howling winds that bit at any exposed skin. "Not good at all." The wolves circled them menacingly, teeth bared and spittle dripping from their mouths to the snow below, although it was frozen by the time it hit.

"Any ideas? I'm open to suggestions," Sheba commented, standing back to back with Feizhi over Ivan's body. "Anything you can come up with, I'd like to hear." A wolf made a dash at Feizhi, but she swung her staff upwards and caught it under the jaw with a *crack* that resounded across the mountainside. The wolf stumbled and fell limp to the snow, thoroughly unconscious.

"That?" Feizhi replied nervously, holding her staff defensively. There were still five wolves around them, but they appeared more hesitant now, learning from the other wolf's mistake. Sheba cocked an eyebrow.

"Are they really that weak?" she asked curiously. She raised her own staff and cast a Shine Plasma at the nearest wolf while Feizhi started answering.

"Physically they're mediocre, but they can absorb a fair amount of plasma and electricity and channel it to their own power for attacks," she said, not quickly enough to stop Sheba's attack. The wolf she struck seemed to enjoy the electricity crackling around it, and suddenly charged right at her, fangs glowing with a faint tinge of electrical power. It

clamped onto her arm, and she tried desperately to knock it off, but it wouldn't let go until it had discharged all its electrical power into her body. Sheba shook violently and sunk to one knee, while the sparks still crackled around her and the wolf leapt back after releasing all its charge into her. Sheba trembled (whether it was from the electricity or the cold, neither Feizhi nor she knew) and slowly rose again.

"Let's talk timing," Sheba mumbled miserably, shivering violently against the cold despite the heat of the electricity that was futile in warming her up. Feizhi didn't hear her over the wind. While Sheba was griping over the wolves battle abilities, Feizhi called up a gust of wind and blew a drift of snow over the lead wolf (or at least, the wolf she *hoped* was the lead wolf) to distract it, while she snuck in and swung downwards to clamp it over the head with her staff to knock it out as well.

Unfortunately, for everything she had remembered about the tundra wolves, she'd forgotten about their amazing senses. Though the wolf couldn't see her, it was more than able to hear and smell her, especially as Feizhi's own gust of wind blew her scent in that direction. In addition, the snow also acted as a screen that kept Feizhi from keeping her eyes on the wolf, and also delivered a frigid blast that reminded Feizhi of how tired and cold she really was.. The wolf sidestepped the smash and tackled Feizhi hard, dropping her to the ground. Feizhi's staff became the only thing between the wolf's razor-sharp teeth and her soft, fleshy neck.

"Feizhi!" Sheba cried out, about to run off to help her, but realizing that doing so would leave Ivan completely exposed to the other four wolves. Feeling rather helpless, she settled for keeping her staff in a defensive position and swinging it in a wide arc to keep the wolves at bay. She soon realized,

however, that the cold was starting to get to her again, and she was struggling to stay focused.

Feizhi seemed to be suffering the same fate; her eyes were slowly drooping and she wasn't able to struggle as much against the wolf. Sheba noticed her moving slower and slower with each passing second.

No, wait... that wasn't her moving slower... it just seemed that way because Sheba's eyes were drooping and *she* was slowing down... she tried to stay awake and conscious, but... it was *cold*... it was so... cold. But Ivan was counting on her, now! ...and Feizhi needed help... she had to... had to... but it was so cold... and... she just couldn't...

I-van...

- - - - -

She's freezing cold.

I can see that!

Get me some hot water bottles, we'll thaw them out like that if we have to.

Oh, that'll be helpful.

Well, what do you suggest?

Do you really have to ask?

Yes.

...a really, really, big fire?

Heh.

... for a Jupiter Adept, you have a startling addiction to fire.

Scary, huh?

Sheba's eyes flickered. It was *way* too noisy for her liking. She had such a headache... she just wanted to sleep and-

Wait. Sleep? She couldn't sleep now! There were wolves, and Ivan was... Ivan was...

"Ivan!" she cried, bolting upright. The named Adept twitched in his bed, moved to get up, then fell back under the covers of his bed and shivered uncontrollably, frigid to the bone. He noticed two people standing nearby.

"Where...ah-choo!" Ivan sneezed, cutting himself off before he could say much of anything. Sheba caught on quickly.

"Where are we?" she wondered aloud, looking in the general direction of the pair, although she couldn't quite focus much on them, yet.

"You're in the Doango Mountains," one offered. She was short and pretty, with shoulder length red hair and a long robe that covered her, from shoulders to ankles. A pair of glasses sat on her nose.

"They know that much," grinned the other, a male who was a good foot taller than her, with brown hair, dark slacks and a dark purple shirt, both of which were more or less concealed behind a drab brown cloak. "I think they want more specifics."

"If they're dumb enough to wander around the Doango Mountains dressed like that, then they obviously don't know enough about where they are!" she countered.

"Enough!" Ivan found himself crying from under the sheets of his bed. "Just give me a few details, please." The girl nodded.

"This is a research library located atop a mountain in the Doango Mountain Range. We have many books and tomes for the more studious among the populace, including-"

"That will do," Sheba cut her off, rubbing her temples gingerly. "Thank you." The girl looked slightly put-out, but smiled nonetheless.

"How did we get here?" Ivan wondered. To his right, Feizhi moaned. He hadn't even noticed her and she was less than a metre away.. *I must be beat up pretty badly*, Ivan thought.

"We heard a loud crack, and snarling of wolves. We also saw bright flashes of lighting and a great drift of snow arise from nowhere," the male replied. "The people of this tower who regularly visit, such as us, have a habit of looking out for those in these mountains. We thought someone might be in trouble, and we're the only ones here right now, so we came to help. We found you and brought you back here. It's morning now, by the way. You were all out like a light all night."

"You took out five wolves by yourselves?" Sheba asked, shocked. "I'm amazed!"

"Well, it wasn't much," the girl blushed, her face perfectly matching her hair. "We're used to fighting them. They have weaknesses, you just have to know where to look."

"Under the chin?" Sheba smiled.

"Sharp teeth, glass jaw," he replied, with a grin. "I think your friend is up." Feizhi started rising at the same time as he

spoke, shaking her head and blinking furiously.

"Where-"

"Here we go again," Ivan muttered.

While the two were explaining things to Feizhi, Ivan and Sheba took the opportunity to finally look around the room. They were all resting in beds that lay against a wall, directly opposite doors which Ivan assumed led outside to the mountains. The walls were lined with books and tomes, lined up on shelves that rose up to the considerably high ceiling. Ladders could slide along the walls to allow for potential readers to get up to the highest parts.

The room was circular, and in fact, the tower appeared to be just made up of the one room. Aside from the book shelves that went nearly around the entire circumference of the interior of the building, there was little else inside, save for a spiral staircase leading up that Sheba noted led to another level. Ivan was too cold to move, still, but Sheba, despite her fatigue, found herself getting up and walking along the shelves, browsing the books and tomes.

"Fast recoverers, aren't you?" the male asked. Ivan nodded.

"We've had our share of speedy convalescence," he agreed. "It kinda sticks with you after awhile. By they way, I never got your names..."

"Oh!" she girl asked. "Corianna," she smiled, bowing her head slightly.

"Marcus," he smiled, moving in to shake Ivan's hand warmly (Ivan noted how warm Marcus' hand was compared to his; how cold *was* he?). "You can call me Marc."

It took another hour for both Ivan and Feizhi to be up and walking. Once they were, the five of them started walking around, exploring the books, tomes and whatever else they could find. Eventually, the group took the spiral staircase up and discovered a single, circular room on the next floor. There were no doors or windows to go anywhere else or see anywhere else. The only thing in the room was a pedestal with a place for a hand to be placed.

"What's this?" Sheba wondered.

"You don't know?" Corianna asked, cocking her head sideways in confusion. "It's the bridge link."

"The what?" Ivan said, confused.

"The bridge link," Marc replied. "It links the Seula Plains to the island where a forbidden shrine is located."

"A shrine?" Sheba said, interested. "Really?"

"Sure," Corianna replied. "Give it a shot. Just put your hand on it." Feizhi stepped forward and read the inscription ('The Grand Seula Island Bridge - Do Not Touch'), which Marc replied she could safely ignore because everyone stayed clear of the forbidden shrines, anyway. Feizhi went ahead and placed her hand on the pedestal, right on an imprint of a handprint etched into the surface.

- - - - -

"Breakfast!" Garet smiled, patting his full stomach and reclining against the soft grass. "My favourite meal of the day!"

"Along with lunch, dinner, brunch, your miscellaneous 3 o'clock snacks and midnight chow time," Picard smirked,

causing waves of laughter to echo through the group.

"You ate more than I did," Gareth pointed out, and indeed, in a rare fit of hunger, Picard had out-eaten the previously thought unbeatable Gareth, although with a great deal more etiquette.

"Just give me a few of the scraps, then," Jenna answered, walking over with Mia beside her and the baby pegasus wide-eyed and alert in her hand. Mia nodded sagely.

"Clifford's hungry," she said. Felix cocked an eyebrow.

"...Clifford?"

"Look at it this way," Jenna said. "We're in a Jupiter Realm. We're on floating islands. All of the floating islands are surrounded by cliffs, because they lead to a fatal drop to the acidic surface. Thus, its name is Clifford, because we'll all end up abbreviating it to Cliff." Picard folded his arms over his chest and looked pensive.

"Why do I get the sneaking feeling that there's a better reason than that for its name?" Mia grinned.

"Hey, at least it's better than what Jenna originally came up with." Gareth wisely scooted away from Jenna and gathered his courage.

"What was that name, for interest's sake?"

"...Peggy." This comment was followed by exactly 3.4 seconds of utter silence, followed by rambunctious snorts of laughter. That was followed by a *very* stern glare from Jenna, and then more dead, utter silence.

"You do remember that it's a male pegasus, right, Jenna?" Felix asked carefully. Jenna opened her mouth to reply, but as soon as she did, a brilliant flash of light went off from nearby, and much to their surprise, a giant, golden glowing bridge appeared, spanning the gap between the plains and the island.

"What in Mercury?" Mia wondered aloud, but Felix had already grabbed his Levatine and dashed for the bridge.

"Hurry!" he cried. "In case it disappears again, we have to catch it now!" The others nodded and ran for the bridge, Picard and Gareth lagging behind because they had just eaten the most. Picard, having eaten more than anyone else, including Gareth, was a good five feet behind him when they all started crossing the bridge. Felix was well ahead and was the first across the bridge and onto the island. Jenna and Mia, being naturally light and quick, were across next (Jenna safeguarding Cliff in the palm of her hands), and Gareth had just got his foot over the end of the bridge onto the island with Picard ten feet behind him when disaster struck.

- - - - -

"There's a bridge there, now," Marc explained. "If you were to take your hand away the bridge would disappear." Feizhi nodded.

"Yes... I can feel it drawing on my Psynergy to sustain itself," she agreed. "That's very interesting."

"It makes me wonder why they would build it all the way out here," Ivan pointed out. Corianna simply shrugged and shook her head.

"No one knows," she admitted. "I'd like to know, though."

"Well," Sheba sighed, "we may as well head out, then. To the downstairs?"

"Very well," Feizhi said, stepping back and removing her hand from the imprint.

- - - - -

Garet had just crossed the end of the bridge onto the island, but Picard was well behind him when the bridge suddenly disappeared.

"What in- *Mercury!*" Picard cried out, his feet pushing against air. Garet stumbled to the ground safely, having nothing for his foot to kick off from, but Picard found himself falling toward the island and down toward the acidic and sulfuric surface below. The others cried out to him as they saw him slam violently against the side of the island and plummet downward.

- - - - -
- - - - -

(Char): ...you're picking on Picard? *Picard?*

Maybe...

(Char): Do you have *any idea* how many OBHLs read this?

Maybe...

(Char): And do you have *any idea* how badly I'll hurt you if you say that again?

May- ...oops.

(Char):

(sighs) This isn't gonna end well.

Hey, but it might... if you *review!!*

No, really. Review!

***Chapter 7*: A Literal Cliffhanger, Among Other Thing...**

(Char): Since when did we get up to seven chapters already?
Since I wrote seven chapters and posted them all...

(Dew): ...he's got a point.

(Char): Quiet, you. I have a brick.

(Dew): (*cowers*)

I'm scared of that brick.

(Dew): Y'remember the good old days when we used to beat
on you, instead?

...I didn't like those days.

(Dew): Diamond Berg I did.

Ackpth! That's cold!

(Dew): Hehehe... yeah.

(Char): I'm satisfied.

(Dew): Me, too. The reviews, then?

(*sneezes*)

Review Responses:

Caster of Chaos: Somehow, yes it did. And trust me, you'll
like them more after this chapter. Mwaha.

Akachi: This counts as soon, yes? Three months ago? Wonderful.

Taiga: That name made me laugh. It was well chosen.

Midnight C: You'd have thought he'd have died from crashing into the sea, wouldn't you? And don't give me ideas, it's all too easy to make the island capsize or something...

Jupiter Sprite: Ack! It's the March of the OBHL Brigade! And leave the tundra wolves out of this!

-

"*Picard!*" Mia cried out, watching him plummet over the edge. She threw herself to the edge and reached out with her Clothos Distaff, trying to reach him so he could grab on. Picard was falling too fast, though, and he flailed, uselessly grabbing toward the staff unsuccessfully as he tumbled ever-downward. Jenna snapped her fingers, an idea reflected in her eyes.

"Grab something!" Jenna yelled, and Picard twisted himself just within arm's reach of the island, just close enough to grab one of the water-deprived roots to save himself. Picard dangled on the underside of the island, nearly out of sight of the others (they could just barely see his swinging body), but still able to hear them quite well.

"Uhh... *help!*" they heard his voice carried up to them. Mia stood up and brushed herself off.

"What are we going to *do?*" she asked quickly, trying to keep the group calm, but her own voice was starting to betray her, shaky and fearful.

"We might need a better suggestion than 'Grab something,'" Gareth pointed out. Undeterred, Jenna hit him.

"We need a way to pull him up," Felix thought out loud. "Did we bring rope, or something like rope?" Gareth shook his head.

"It never seemed really necessary. Lash was always good enough," Gareth commented, shaking his head. "How about using the Catch Beads?"

"I think Ivan has those..." Jenna mumbled.

"...bloody useless," Felix muttered.

"What if we-" Jenna started, but stopped herself when she felt movement from her hair. Cliff, though still small enough to fit into her palm, was as courageous as his owner. He leapt off his comfortable perch and (now much more familiar with the air) flew over to the edge and dived along the side. He clamped onto Picard's headscarf with his teeth and started struggling to fly upward. The motion did little more than flap the headscarf a little.

"It's so cute..." Mia said, becoming totally distracted from the peril at hand. Jenna was almost squealing with delight over the whole situation. She hopped from one foot to the other.

"It's adorable," she managed to say, before Picard started yelling at them.

"Do you want more than my headscarf back, or not!" he burst, very un-Picardlike. *"Help!"*

"All right, all right!" Felix cried. "Hold on, I've got an idea!"

"*Hold on!*" Picard cried up sarcastically, howling over the wind. "Thanks!"

"Garet!" Felix called urgently. "Call up Forge... quickly! That should give Picard enough strength to climb the roots the rest of the way up!" Garet nodded his understanding, and stood as close to the edge as he dared.

"*Unleash Forge!*" he cried swinging his arm out to direct the Mars Djinni toward Picard. A crimson aura covered him from head to toe, and his physical strength started increasing. Slowly, but surely, Picard started grasping vine after vine, hauling himself up the side of the island. There were a few scary points where the others didn't think he had any more roots to grab, or was about to fall, but thankfully he was able to get himself about with some incredible feats of strength. Finally, he managed to barely heave himself over the edge. Panting heavily, he collapsed on the ground, with Cliff, wracked with exhaustion, curled up on his chest. Jenna scooped up the baby gently in one hand, and smacked Picard full force with the other.

"How *dare* you make us worry like that?" she exclaimed furiously. Felix chuckled.

"That means she was exceptionally concerned," he smirked. Picard chortled and rose slowly, letting his body readjust to moving without the additional Djinni bonuses. Mia extended a hand to help him to his feet, and he rose sorely. Garet took a breath as he felt Forge re-set to him, and then moved over to look at the shrine itself.

The building was cylindrical, and Garet noted that it was shorter than the Elemental Lighthouses of Weyard. The front was shiny and attractive, red and yellow stones blending perfectly to give off a beautiful shade, not quite orange but

yet the deepest orange he'd ever seen (if that didn't make sense, bear in mind that neither does Gareth, half of the time). The door was sealed with a Psynergy Barrier, red and yellow in colour, mixed beautifully.

"It's red," Gareth announced. "So... Mars?" Felix nodded silently.

"Looks like Venus, too," he figured. "So, it's the heat of Mars and the aridness of Venus."

"The Shrine to Dryness," Mia explained. "A Mars Adept and a Venus Adept have to open the way." Jenna stepped forward, handing Cliff off to Mia.

"Shall we?" she asked of Felix, standing beside him and gathering her Psynergy. Felix nodded.

"Let's. Hit the door, but try not to overkill it."

Gareth backed off as the two gathered their energies, rings of Psynergy, red for Jenna and yellow for Felix, visible around their hands. Finally, they cast their spells simultaneously.

"Ragnarok!"

"Pyroclasm!"

The magical sword of light swung through the fiery blaze, scattering the embers but superheating the phantasmal blade, forcing it to glow scarlet with heat. The burning sword pierced the barrier, and, after a few moments of straining, caused it to crack and shatter, the pieces fading out of sight. The door was open.

"Well, then," Mia said, passing the pegasus back to Jenna as she passed her, "we've a beacon to light. Onward?"

-

"Thank you for everything," Feizhi said politely, a curt bow to their temporary companions before she turned toward the door. The winds had died down and it was morning, so the mountains were significantly warmer, and certainly warm enough that they could travel much more safely. Ivan took a firm grip on his Clothos Distaff and led Sheba and Feizhi outside, with a thankful and courteous wave to Corianna and Marc.

Ivan's first thought, upon getting outside once the door clicked shut behind them, was that the temperature was significantly higher. It wasn't frigid cold anymore; in fact, there was only a slight chill in the air, but other than a cool breeze, it was downright pleasant. Even Sheba, though born in a desert she was, felt quite comfortable.

"You know," Sheba mentioned off-handedly, "even though I was born in a desert, I feel quite comfortable now."

"Yeah, that'll happen when it's not colder than a Lunpean's heart out here," Ivan joked. Sheba stifled a laugh.

The trail was still snow-covered, but the winds weren't blowing, so there were no snowdrifts, and it was bright out, so they could see where they were going perfectly. It wasn't long before Feizhi noticed that there were a couple of caves that led deeper into the mountain.

"I wonder where they lead?" she wondered. Ivan stood at the entrance and peered into the depths.

"Hello-o-o-o!" he cried into it, the echo bouncing back at them every few seconds. Sheba moved quickly to cover his mouth before he said anything.

"Be quiet!" she snapped. "The last thing we need is an avalanche to start, forcing us into the caverns and pinning us there!"

Prophetic or not, they heard a low rumbling soon after she spoke. Thankfully, nothing else came of it, and Feizhi breathed deeply.

"False alarm," she sighed. "Should we explore? It seems that there's *a/ways* something in a cave worth gathering."

"That's true," Ivan agreed. "But we might want to walk on and catch up to Mia and the others. If they passed through here, they might have gone on."

"Or they might have explored this cave," Sheba pointed out. Ivan frowned and crossed his arms.

"The question should be," Feizhi said slowly, "what do we have to lose by exploring it?"

"What do we have to gain?" Ivan countered. "Incidentally, Feizhi, if you wanted an answer, time." Sheba sighed. Ivan shook his head. "I just don't think it's a really good idea right now." He took a step outward from the cave, but suddenly heard a faint noise echoing across the mountains and stopped.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

Rumble.

The rumble he was unsure of, but the crunch was definitely footsteps in snow. He scanned his eyes around the paths he could see, and his heart sank into his throat and very nearly kept him from breathing. In the distance, a few hills away but closing fast, was a unit of Keunam Fighters, coming in

fast. Ivan turned on his heel, and ran toward the opening, ushering in Sheba and Feizhi as gentlemanly but as urgently as possible.

"This idea is sounding better with every passing second..." he muttered. "Move!"

"What?" Sheba asked.

"Fighters," he replied ominously.

"...oh."

Rumble.

-

The three of them progressed deeper and deeper into the cave, all the while the tunnel growing darker and darker, but their vision adjusting so it was just in balance, and they could just barely see.

"I can't believe it," Ivan muttered. "A situation where Gareth would be *useful*."

"Stop complaining and go deeper," Sheba muttered, feeling her way along the wall to get deeper without needing her eyes too much. The cave suddenly shook with another loud rumble.

"That's starting to worry me... what is it?" Feizhi asked.

"Probably not too much, right?" Ivan said wishfully. Another rumble. Sheba trembled slightly, probably from the shaking that accompanied the rumble.

"This is getting less and less good," Sheba muttered. "I am not liking this at all." Feizhi nodded, but no one could really

see her. Ivan cocked an eyebrow.

"Less and less 'good?' Is that engli-ow," he exclaimed, as she nudged him perhaps a little harder than necessary in the ribs. "At any rate, I'd be happy if I could see a little more-*oomph!*" he grunted. Sheba and Feizhi heard a *thud*, like something being hit by something else, and then a collision as though something hit the wall.

"Ivan?" Sheba called out cautiously.

"I'm here!" Ivan groaned, getting up slowly, leaning against the wall for support. "Be careful... there's something here!"

"Something like what?" Feizhi asked nervously.

"You know those rumbles?" Ivan asked.

"Yeah."

"I don't think they're rumbles."

"Then what are they?"

"Really, *really* big growls."

"...uh-oh."

-

Next chapter is battle time! And it'll be nice and long, too, I know this was annoying short filler, but you've gotta get through that to get to the fun stuff, right?

(Dew): About time! Killing stuff!

(Char): What about the shrine?

Who said we can't do both scenes?

(Dew): And give you a chance to mini-cliff as you jump between groups?

Yeah. Isn't life awesome?

And it's even more awesome as you review! So why not?

The Golden Sun Fanfiction Archive.
www . midcatwmn . com / goldensun
Go. Love.